

‘Storks and Lilies’, *The Chicago Herald* (Chicago, IL), 11 Feb. 1882¹

REPOSEFUL, SOULFUL OSCAR COMES.

The Sublime Egotist Tells Columbia What Course She Is to Take and Pats Her Head Encouragingly and Bestows a Smile.

Oscar Wilde arrived in the city last evening from Buffalo and went to the Grand Pacific Hotel. He complained at first of being very tired, and asked that he might not be disturbed. Later, however, he intimated that he would see representatives of the press at half-past nine, at which hour the reporter of the *HERALD* presented his card and himself to the hotel clerk who acted as the intermediary between them and the great aesthete. The representatives of the other journals crowded after them. This was more than the apostle of culture had bargained for, and he sent word that he was not equal to the task of talking to more than, at the most, two at once. In short he insisted on a two-two arrangement.² His wishes were complied with, and the party was divided. When the *HERALD* reporter and his companion were ushered into the great presence Oscar greeted them with effusion, treating each to a warm hand-shake, and a polite invitation to be seated. He himself assumed a recumbent position on a couch aesthetically covered with a bearskin and a buffalo robe. Oscar is all that fancy paints him. He is tall. He is lady-like. His flowing golden locks are parted in the middle and hung in slightly waving masses down to his shoulders, framing a face which but for the expressive eyes would be commonplace. Clad in gray trousers, a mouse-colored velvet jacket, magenta necktie, red socks, and very every-day, unaesthetic slippers, with the end of a red handkerchief peeping from the breast pocket of his jacket, he presented a picture for gods and men. He smokes. Asked how he liked his reception, he said:

“Personally—what I have come across in society—the reception I have met with from your men and women has been most pleasant. You mean, I suppose, your newspapers?”

Being informed that the question had especial reference to the manner in which his audiences received him, he said: “If you mean those scholars at Boston (laughing heartily), that was a bit of school-boy fun not meant in any sort of malice.³ But it is different with the newspapers.”

“In what way?”

1. Included in Colonel Morse’s scrapbook from Oscar Wilde’s tour of America (British Library, Add MS 81822, f. 86–7). The reporter was accompanied by the author of “Oscar Wilde,” *The Chicago Daily Tribune* (Chicago, IL), 11 Feb. 1882, 3, repr. *The Complete Interviews*, 158–62.

2. A play on aesthetic slang (“too too”), but also accurate: Wilde spoke to two pairs of interviewers.

3. Wilde refers to the Harvard incident: see *The Complete Interviews*, 134, note 2.

"Well, for this reason. In England, one knows from long study of the English character, if one tries to create any new movement, to produce any new work in poetry or painting, or to protest in any way against the commonplace life of the modern English people—one knows that at once one loses all ordinary rights of a citizen, and that everything slander and folly and ridicule can do will be done; so, personally, I have long ago ceased to find any pleasure or to receive any pain from what anonymous newspaper writers choose to say of me. The harm that they have done in America has been to the public and not to me. America should be a country without prejudice. The newspapers seem to have raised again that mist of misrepresentation, that fog of folly which blinds people to all that is noble and simple and strong in a great movement. I feel, when I lecture, that for the first half of my lecture, at least, I am merely struggling against the misrepresentation that has preceded me. Whether, before I have finished my lecture, I am able to dispel that is not for me to say; I hope that I am. I do not think, however, that we in England would welcome any young American who had won any position in poetry or in art, who had something to say and would say it, in the way in which I have been welcomed. I acknowledge though that, as I have said, I steeled myself years ago against feeling pleasure or pain from that source. But I had an idea when I was coming to America that people would listen to what I had to tell them about the most concentrated art movement we have ever had in England, that they would judge me by what I said, and would not make up mere literary garbled folly against me. In Europe we are all so overweighted [*sic*] with prejudice, so trammelled [*sic*] by history, so old, that we always think of America as a country without any prejudice. When we think of you in Europe we think of you as a simple, practical, grand nation."

Oscar was asked at this stage to favor his interviewers with a definition of his mission.

"I want to tell the American people what is the meaning of this movement in England, to which England is giving so much of its genius and so much of its youth. You have had the satire first; I think you should now hear the truth. We look to America in England for newer and more natural forms of art; we look to you for a school of sculpture particularly. 'Man does not live by bread alone,'¹ and we feel that with your wonderful climate, the strong, healthy physique of your men and women, and the quick enthusiasm of life among you, you should have most noble art. Up to this you have had much to contend with; you have had to conquer nature and to conquer your own enemies. You have done both in a shorter time than any nation ever did it before. There comes now a period of peace with you—a period for production, for a more widely spread civilization than you have yet had time to produce. You have seen, more than any modern nation, that life without industry is barren—you must remember that industry without art is barbarism.² All these wonderful material inventions that make life easier and lighter for

1. See *The Complete Interviews*, 161, note 1.

2. Art and barbarism: see *The Complete Interviews*, 117, note 1.

you—the steam engine, the telegraph, and the like, are noble or not entirely in the spirit in which you use them. The problem of modern life is how, with all these wonderful inventions—far greater than any that Greek or Italian ever dreamed of—you can create a civilization greater, or even as great as theirs.”

“Then, Mr. Wilde, you regard the modern civilization as less perfect than the Greek?”

“Yes. Modern civilization has done nothing to compare with the achievements of the ancients. We owe to them the invention of letters—nothing has been in modern times to compare with that or with the discovery of the science of numbers. I know (laughing) that the Greeks, for instance, were remarkably more civilized than the English nation. It is very valuable to be able to speak through a telephone to a man at the antipodes, but the value entirely depends on the worth of what one has to say; it is very valuable to travel at sixty miles an hour, but the value entirely depends on how much the man who travels can gain from the places he sees and the things he visits. Most English people race over Italy in two weeks and bring back a memory of a bad dinner at Verona, or how their courier cheated them at Rome. To be content with merely material sub-stratum of civilization is as if a literary man were to be content with knowing all the letters of the alphabet and never care to combine them or to use them. There is a general idea that the artist has a supernatural horror of a steam engine. Let me assure you that nothing of the kind is the case. One of Turner’s most beautiful pictures, hanging in the National Gallery in London, is a picture of an express train.¹ All that we feel about such inventions is that we want people to use them for the noblest purposes. Civilization has only one aim—to give every man the opportunity of realizing the perfection of his own nature. One must never mistake the means for the end.”

Asked what he thought about the natural features of the country through which he has passed since his arrival, the aesthete replied: “I have only seen two things that were wonderful—the Hudson River and Niagara Falls.” Of the first he said: “I should imagine its beauty is chiefly in autumn, when the trees are in their wonderful foliage; but even as I saw it, with the trees all brown and leafless, there was a wonderful beauty about it. As for Niagara,” he went on after a laugh at the insinuations of one of his too-too visitors that it may not have been arranged to suit him, “one knows nothing of it till one is underneath the falls.”

“Were you not pleased with them as seen from the top?”

“I don’t think that when one sees them first one at all realizes how sublime they are. The outlines are somewhat monotonous. But I don’t think I ever realized so strongly the splendor of the beauty of the mere physical force of nature as I did when I stood by Table Rock. Another thing that interested me very much was the curious repetition of the same forms, of the same design almost, in the shapes of the falling water. It gave

1. See *The Complete Interviews*, 161, note 4.

me a sense of how completely what seems to us the wildest liberty of nature is restrained by a governing law.”

“Mr. Wilde, they say that you were not pleased with the Atlantic. May it be asked if that is true?”

“Oh, that unfortunate saying! It will become historic, I suppose,” and the long curls shook, and the whole frame of the aesthete quivered, as he enjoyed a hearty laugh. “You know I wanted to see a big storm. I am very fond of the sea, and I have been at sea in very rough weather. I wanted to see the fury of an Atlantic gale. The grandest sight I ever saw in my life was a storm coming from Athens to Naples—a cyclone that came from the desert.”¹

The character of the conversation changed at this point, Oscar turning inquisitor and putting questions concerning the city, its resources, the great fire and the way the place was rebuilt, its art collections, etc. he expressed great admiration for the American character, which, he says, is remarkable for individualism, self-respect, and many other good qualities, and appeared much gratified to know that there are but few paupers in the country. He says that he goes from here to Fort Wayne and Detroit, where he lectures on Thursday and Friday, and will not extend his tour further west than St. Louis, returning East from that point.² Talking of Ireland, he grew animated in describing her wrongs. “Ireland,” he said, “is the Niobe of nations.” On his return to New York he will superintend the production of his play, which will portray modern Russia, and which will not be so ornately mounted as New York papers have said. He declined to say just what its title is or who will produce it.³

1. See *The Complete Interviews*, 160, note 2.

2. Wilde kept to these plans for Fort Wayne and Detroit. He lectured in St. Louis on 25 February. The tour continued without pause, with Wilde taking in various Midwestern cities before travelling west to California.

3. *Vera*; or, *The Nihilists*. Wilde is being unnecessarily coy: he had shared the title of the play with his first American interviewers (see e.g. “Oscar Wilde’s Arrival,” *The New York World, Semi-Weekly Edition* (New York, NY), 3 Jan. 1882, 4, repr. *The Complete Interviews*, 31–5, 34).